

AUTHENTIC ASSESSMENT: TRY THE *THIRD* OPTION

BY JANET G. MALLERY

“Yes, I am interested in my students’ learning, but I don’t know if I’m ready to go to authentic assessment.* What’s so great about it?” This is the view expressed by many teachers who have heard that going this route is going to make more work for them—such as having to change their grading system and learn a new vocabulary loaded with words such as *rubrics* and *showcase portfolios*.

Several years ago, the Pacific Union Conference Office of Education sponsored a Portfolio Assessment Committee composed mainly of elementary teachers. The committee set out to review the literature in the field and make recommendations to the union K-8 curriculum committee about the use of authentic assessment. After much study and discussion, the committee decided that our schools should use this valuable tool. However, they concluded that there may be more than two perspectives: *Yes*, use authentic assessment; or *No*, do not use it.

A story is told about Hubert Humphrey, 38th vice president of the United States, that offers some insights

**Authentic assessment is defined in this article as portfolios and other related techniques that highlight the work and performance of the student as the central means of assessment.*

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about the use of authentic assessment. As a young man, Hubert worked as a pharmacist in his father's drugstore, where he also made milk shakes at the soda fountain. Since his dad raised chickens, it was important that they sell milk shakes with eggs blended in to make the family egg venture profitable. When Hubert asked the patrons, "Do you want a milk shake with an egg or without one?" the common response was "Without." Pondering how to improve egg sales, Hubert began to ask another question—a third option, "Do you want one egg or two in your milk shake?" This third option boosted the Humphrey egg business, as one-egg milk shake purchases soared.

The third-option perspective in authentic assessment goes beyond "Yes, I will use authentic assessment," or "No, I will not use it." It offers another way of looking at things, letting the teacher choose some elements of the authentic assessment approach while leaving out others. This brings the practical and meaningful concepts of authentic assessment into classrooms while maintaining many important aspects of "traditional" grading. Tests can still be used to verify knowledge or can be combined with portfolios. Teachers who want to move ahead in their professional growth but are not comfortable launching out into unknown waters all at once will appreciate the third option. Although it is a more limited and less-risky method of assessment, significant things can happen with this practical approach.

In reality, many teachers already use some aspects of authentic assessment. Most K-12 teachers make student work available for parent-teacher conferences and include hands-on projects in the curriculum. With this foundation and a little more organization, they can incorporate other aspects of authentic assessment into their classrooms.

Portfolio Presentation

Take, for example, the portfolio presentation method, which builds on a part of authentic assessment that is probably already used in many classrooms. With a little additional effort, teachers can use this approach to gener-

ate good will, clear communication, and positive rapport between their school and constituents. And students will experience success as they participate.

Portfolio presentation is a culminating learning experience when students share with guests (board members, parents, church members, etc.) who visit their classroom a portrait of themselves as able learners. They paint for the guests a rich, developmental picture of learning and achievement that reflects upon the sound teaching practices in their classroom.

Suggested steps in the portfolio presentation process are as follows:

1. With the student, collect samples of work to place in a collection folder (often called a working portfolio). Set limits on what is feasible to save. Example: "Select three things from this week's work [or this unit] to place into the collection folder. Date all items going into the folder." Provide samples of items suitable for the folder, so that students will know what is required. Things to include in this folder can come from a variety of sources:

- Audio tapes of the student reading favorite works
- Video tapes or presentations
- Book reports
- Student-maintained reading logs
- Projects (literature-based, science, social studies, etc.—take a photograph

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of the project and include it in the portfolio)

- Work written in the student's primary language
- Solution to an open-ended question done as homework
- Report from a group project with a comment about the individual's contribution
- Written work (poetry, journal, report, letter, script, etc.)
- Mathematics (diagrams, graphs, charts, computer printouts)
- Artwork
- Selected sample from a workbook or blackline master

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Portfolio presentation is a culminating learning experience when students share with guests . . . who visit their classroom a portrait of themselves as able learners.

- Tests

Teachers, too, will benefit from viewing these student experiences as a checklist to monitor their own progress as they seek to provide a variety of learning experiences.

2. At the end of each month, have each student select at least two to four items to place in a showcase portfolio. These portfolios will highlight the student's finest work over a period of time. Students should review and re-evaluate the contents of their showcase portfolio monthly. If appropriate, they can exchange items with something from their collection folder.

3. Grade the items before they are placed into the showcase folder. Since portfolios are intended to build self-esteem, the student may not want a visible grade attached to the project/paper. To facilitate this, use an alternate method of communicating the grade. This could include:

- Write only teacher comments on the project/paper, rather than grades.
- Put a star at the top of the paper/project if satisfactory (as age appropriate).

- Put the grade on a Post-It note. The student can remove the note before placing the work into the showcase portfolio.

- Lightly pencil in the grade, so the student can erase it if he or she desires.
- Include some ungraded projects (i.e., maps, lists of books read, or memory verses learned, etc.).

- Cover the grade with a sticker when the item is placed into the showcase portfolio. With the child, prepare a short evaluation form to go with the selected item, attaching it to the work before it goes in the showcase portfolio.

Portfolio Night

4. Select a date and time for a Portfolio Night presentation when school board members, parents, and people from the community can visit the school. Or, schedule a time when students share their work with church members and senior citizens. This could be included in Grandparents' Day or spring open house.

5. Send out invitations/explanations to the desired audience. (See Sample: Letter/Invitation below.)

6. Before the students present their showcase portfolios, have them role play exactly what they will say. Provide some time for them to practice the best ways to present themselves and their work to an audience. Help them to introduce themselves and listen politely to questions from the guests. As a review,

Sample: Letter/Invitation

Dear _____,

You are invited to come to Portfolio Night and see what our students are learning at _____ School. This will be a special time when you will meet with a student and he/she will share with you some learning experiences from this school year. Our students have collected examples of their work from the past months, and are anxious to tell you about it.

We hope you can come to Room _____ at _____ p.m. for this rewarding event. It is our way of saying "Thank you" for your support to our school.

Sincerely,

Your Name

ask them to discuss what they learned from the project/display. Have students practice thanking the guest for coming to the school.

7. On Portfolio Presentation Day, have each student spend 10 to 15 minutes reviewing the contents of his or her showcase portfolio with a guest, one to one. Time schedules will determine how many guests each student can see.

The advantages of this use of authentic assessment are tremendous. The guests see what is going on at the church school they support through monthly subsidies and/or committee memberships. The students show that they are learning—and are highly motivated to continue with their success. The teacher is rewarded, too, with a more extensive and accurate sample of what students are learning, which demonstrates his or her success in teaching.

Teachers who truly believe that helping young people learn is what education is all about will naturally want to expand student opportunities. Other creative methods can be used to incorporate authentic assessment into the classroom and to increase students' chances of success. Taking the third option, which encourages adapting and enlarging current authentic assessment practices, can really make a difference! ☞

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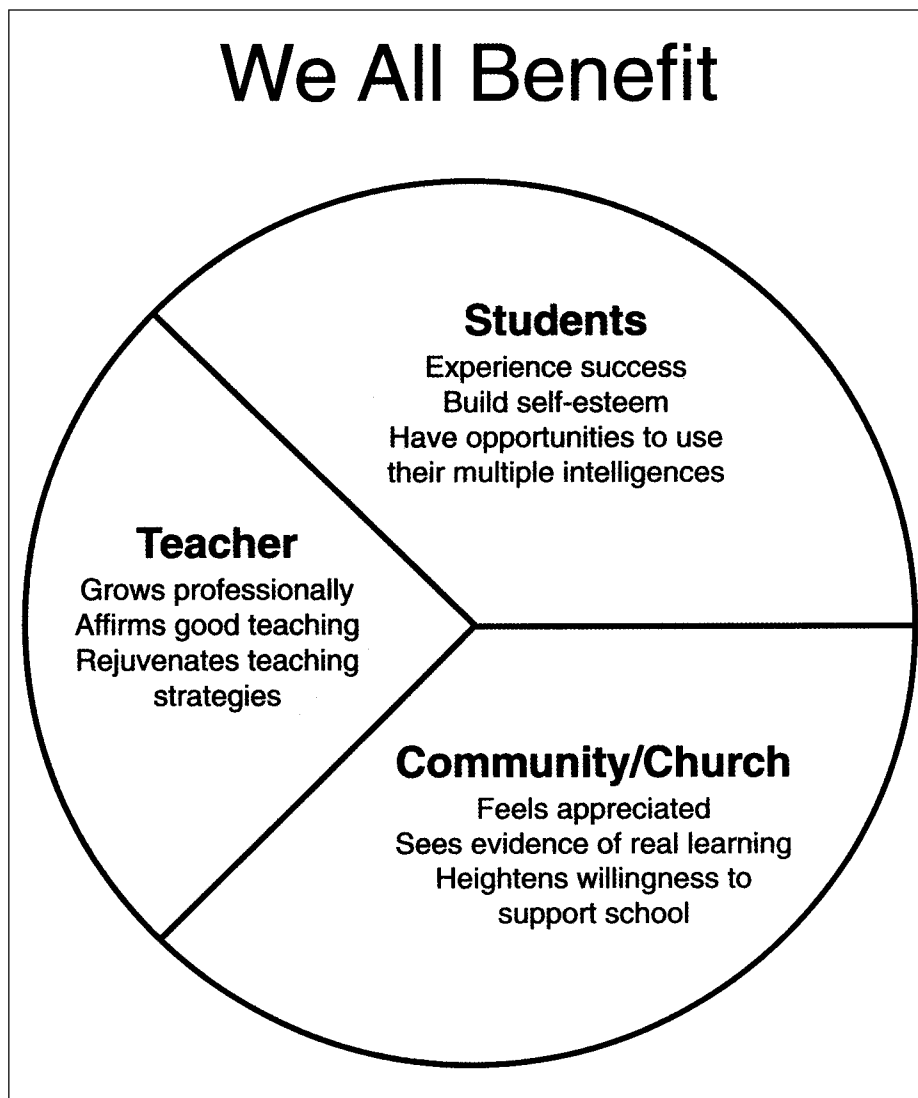
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